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9th Annual Steve Biko Memorial Lecture

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I cannot sufficiently express the honour bestowed by the invitation to deliver this 9th Steve Biko Memorial Lecture. I want to sincerely thank the members of both the Biko family and the Biko Foundation for the privilege they thus bestow. I also want to express my deep appreciation to each of you for being here – your time and energy are amongst your greatest assets – thank you for giving up some of it to be here.

This lecture takes place at a time when, as a country, we are going through some trying growth pains; together we are searching for inspiration, seeking guidance and yearning for leadership. Our country is undergoing a complex and sometimes painful examination of its foundations, its values and its institutions. It is at times such as this that a nation has to dig deep within itself, take careful observations and focus on repairing its soul. During such trying times, it is not uncommon for us Africans to seek the wisdom of our departed ancestors, and it is the life's work of Bantu Steve Biko that we today look to for such wisdom.

Biko's writings speak less of his attitude towards the racist governors than it does about the psychology and consciousness of the oppressed. He understood then as we must now, that the consciousness of the poor, and their active participation as agents of

change in their own lives is the key to democratic transformation. For these beliefs, Biko gave his life in the name of freedom and democracy. For this, we owe him a debt of gratitude and he certainly deserves his rightful place in our collective memories.

There cannot be any doubt that from the point of the decision to establish a Black Student movement, to every living moment until Steve's last breath on 12 September 1977, and beyond that to the elections of 27 April 1994 and indeed until today, the focus of our passions and energies has been and remains the fundamental transformation of society.

The struggle for the humanisation of society and for the full realisation of human rights has always been an important dimension of the broader struggle. With some variation, this was the cornerstone of the policy statements of every organisation ever convened to mobilise for freedom. But, if it were ever merely a struggle for human rights, we could have declared "mission accomplished" in 1994 when we retooled and took over all of the key institutions of government. In many respects, that moment, at the start of 27 April 1994, when the orange, white and blue flag was lowered for the last time and the flag which has come to symbolise democracy was first hoisted, was for us a less militaristic equivalent of the arrival of the triumphant revolutionary forces marching into the conquered city. In all of the revolutions that so inflamed our passions, the question was what happened after the troops arrived – and so for us, the question has to be what happened after we pronounced our own triumphs.

How do we want our successes to be measured? Is it the number of millionaires we create or the opportunities we create for the poor we lift out of poverty? Would it be in the number of Black people who now own expensive German sedans, who enjoy 7-digit salaries or occupy estates valued at many millions of Rands? The more appropriate measure is rather to be seen in the profile of poverty that still manifests the same features of race, class and gender that obtained in December 1968 when "those angry young men walked out of NUSAS to establish SASO." The harsh and ugly truth that confronts us is that forty years after the establishment of SASO and almost fifteen years into democracy, the everyday lives of many of our people remains as uninspired and as

filled with despair as it was then. Surely then, a better measure of our collective success is in the numbers of black people who are lifted from poverty; in the measurable interruption of intergenerational poverty and in those instances where we use the power of the state to countervail to take families and communities out of the shadow cast by apartheid's history of denial.

If one were to step outside of this great auditorium and stand on the Jameson steps, one would see both the squalor of many of our townships and informal settlements as well as the stark inequalities that still dominate our cityscapes. The areas where there is a high crime rate are also the areas with the highest TB infection rates. They are also the areas with some of the worst performing schools. We can see the poverty, pockets of mediocrity, where lives have not changed.

Biko's writing on consciousness reminded me of a quote by Karl Marx on the same matter. "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness." Where the physical environment and poor quality of public services combine to create a sense of abandonment, despair takes root. Such despair finds an outlet in action against others who appear to be escaping it – whether they be peers determined to find a way out, women in the neighbourhood, a family who has a few more earthly possessions, or families who speak a different language. What we observe are base instincts that threaten the objectives of freedom and democracy. It is the absence of consciousness that sees some of the worst excesses of crime and social ills in areas such as Nyanga, Khayelitsha, Mitchells Plain and Manenberg, all almost with the sights of Jameson Hall.

We must appreciate that these areas are also home to many of the families who sacrificed greatly to deliver democracy. We must be aware that in all of these areas there are activists who are working hard to roll back this apparent tide of despair. We must pause to consider why this terrible reality exists in the lives of our people.

Perhaps there is something consistently wrong in our communication of the message of freedom – perhaps we have lulled our people into a sense that the struggle had ended at the precise moment when the flag changed. Perhaps it was because we facilitated in

the demobilisation of the organs of civil society that had, after all, been the engine of the Mass Democratic Movement – and I use the word ‘facilitated’ because the demobilisation occurred because the individuals who led these organisations were needed as public representatives and public servants. Or perhaps this happened because those who went into government lost their bearings and replaced everything we understood about social solidarity with a notion of cash transfers – more pensions, and grants.

We ask these questions because this is a moment where we are searching for guidance from ourselves. Perhaps it affords us the time to reflect, to take stock of the unemployed, to understand why we witnessed the appalling violence. And we must understand this knowing that moments of crises can become moments of opportunity. As Roberto Unger, a Brazilian philosopher and now a Minister in President Lula’s Cabinet writes, “the internal dynamics of societies – the revelations of inescapable conflicts and missed opportunities – are the proximate cause of their transformation.”

I am sharing this with you speaking as a Cabinet Minister, as a Member of Parliament (both of which I have been since 1994), and as member of the National Executive Committee of the African National Congress. In sharing these examples, I speak of work undone. Some might be of the view that it is wrong for somebody occupying the positions I do to be this candid – or to talk so frankly. Some might even say that I am being reckless since our fourth democratic elections are scheduled in just a few months and opposition parties will feed on this story. I disagree with those views. We must recognise that there are a series of remarkable achievements in South Africa since the dawn of democracy – and I can quote figures and examples chapter and verse. We have made good progress in extending schooling, in broadening access to health care, in extending social security, in providing people with housing, water, sanitation and electricity.

But our quest is for a democracy that must have a palpable presence in the lives of all of our people. Understanding the xenophobic violence that occurred is by no means an attempt to justify it or legitimise it. On the contrary, it is a call to action, a call for a

consciousness of what our priorities should be and where we are failing. The violence that racked our country is a reminder that our struggle is for a transformed society and we need to understand what remains untransformed. Our determination is to serve our people and, I am afraid, that if we don't know our people and we don't know of their lives, then we are probably serving only ourselves and our consciences.

It is to try and understand those gaps that exist between our very best endeavours in government – in the laws we pass, the finances we allocate, the policies we have adopted and the public servants we employ – between all of that and the lived reality of our people's lives that we return to the source of our inspiration today.

Steve Biko wrote *"It is perhaps fitting to start by examining why it is necessary for us to think collectively about a problem we never created. In doing so, I do not wish to concern myself unnecessarily with the white people of South Africa, but to get to the right answers, we must ask the right questions; we have to find out what went wrong - where and when; and we have to find out whether our position is a deliberate creation of God or an artificial fabrication of the truth by power-hungry people whose motive is authority, security, wealth and comfort, in other words, the "Black Consciousness" approach would be irrelevant in a colourless and non-exploitative egalitarian society. It is relevant here because we believe that an anomalous situation is a deliberate creation of man."* Well, we have confirmed that the country we know, our South Africa, almost fifteen years into democracy remains, despite our best efforts, a country quite far from the "colourless and non-exploitative egalitarian society" that Biko wrote of. So the issues of consciousness have to be as relevant now as they were then. Freedom must be about conscientisation.

Biko's lesson for the debates in our society speak of people's consciousness, of their understanding of empowerment. Empowerment, in turn, is about giving people a stake in democracy, in energising democracy. It speaks of a necessary shift from a mere focus on representative democracy to the imperative of an energised democracy.

What constitutes an energised democracy? It surely cannot be the mere occupation of the institutions of democracy (and they are ours in all the arms of government – the

Legislature, the Judiciary and the Executive) and the ability to pass laws. We are after all past masters at writing statute – we have passed 1 221 pieces of legislation since 1994. Roberto Unger discusses the concept of a high-energy democracy. He calls for ‘a set of institutional arrangements that ensure a continuing high level of organized popular engagement in politics’. He goes on to say, ‘a cold, demobilised politics cannot serve as a means to reorganise society. A hot, mobilised politics is compatible with democracy only when institutions channel its energies. It is a goal that can be achieved as the cumulative and combined effect of many devices.’

Unger explains what it means to establish a high energy democracy: “one that permanently raises the level of organized popular participation in politics, engages the electorate as well as the parties in the rapid and decisive resolution of differences and equips government to rescue people from entrenched and localised situations of disadvantage from which they are unable to exit by the normal forms of political and economic initiative.”

In drawing inspiration from Unger, there are two elements of an energised democracy that I wish to discuss in some detail today. The first is the role of people and communities in energising democracy. The second relates to a social compact, defining a common understanding of each of the rights and responsibilities of various social formations in energising our democracy, in deepening the gains of our revolution and in improving the lives of all of our people.

Biko’s writings sneer at the notion of a passive mass of poor people waiting for a government or a leader to deliver unto them what they seek. He also detested a perspective of development as something that government hands out to people as though it were some type of product or commodity. Under apartheid, it was abundantly clear that development was not a gesture of goodwill conferred by the state. In many respects the starkness of the contradiction between the state and the people focused the mind then. It would have been antithetical to all that defined us and our notions of freedom to believe, even momentarily that they came as gestures of goodwill. Instead, development has to begin with a consciousness amongst people that they have power.

Now, they have the power to elect their own representatives, to hold them accountable, to build institutions of democracy, to talk to each other to resolve differences, to demand functioning public services. People must have the consciousness to understand what development means, to understand what empowerment means, for these are not goodies handed out from mountain tops or at the local welfare office.

Professor Zakes Mda, in the 2001 Biko Memorial Lecture made the following observation, '... Steve Biko and his colleagues did not only take our culture from a protest mode to that of challenge and resistance, they were hands on activists who established practical community development projects. These men and women went beyond moaning and whinging about the plight of black people; they made their hands dirty... building health centres and running them, and facilitating the establishment of communal gardens in marginalised communities. In this way, they aimed to inculcate values of self-reliance and self-development in addition to self-esteem, self-respect and self-confidence'.

I am not suggesting that government must abdicate its responsibilities. Government has roles and responsibilities that it must play and play more effectively. What I am calling for is for more peoples' power, for a deeper understanding of development and for a richer discourse on empowerment.

Let us accept that distorted notions of democracy abound. There are people amongst us; including in government, who want to nurture the notion that empowerment is something that can be dispensed; or worse, that empowerment is exclusively about conferring some right to the rapid accumulation of material wealth. Frequently this arises for self-serving reasons of power over the lives of others. Government cannot deliver development single-handedly, it can and must partner with active and conscious communities to effect real transformation. Yes, government delivers housing or health care or schooling, but these things only contribute towards development if there is a deeper consciousness about what development is. A patronage-serving culture of delivery and empowerment constitute significant threats to our value system and our notion of consciousness.

Let us pause and examine how communities are demobilised. Amongst the first significant pieces of legislation was the 1996 South African Schools Act (Act 84 of 1996) which created, in every school, a Governing Body. The objective is abundantly clear – parents have a direct and enduring interest in the education of their children and the school should be accountable to a community of parents. There are 27 000 schools dotted in every community in our country, large or small; institutions that ought to be accountable to the communities they serve. Yet, this year, the ANC’s January 8th statement speaks to “the non-negotiables of education” as being “teachers at school, in class, on time, teaching; no abuse of learners, no neglect of duty.” The fact that these matters were included in this otherwise celebratory statement speaks to a real set of problems encountered. With the best will in the world, national government sitting in Tshwane or even a provincial government sitting in the provincial capital is unable to monitor teacher attendance, whether teaching is actually taking place or whether students are in class learning. Without the integral involvement of communities, we don’t stand a chance of improving the quality of schooling, especially in poor communities.

Each year when the matric results are issued, the media focus on the schools that have produced excellent results as well as schools where the results leave much to be desired. The Human Science Research Council (HSRC) has a unit whose sole job it is to try to understand what works in driving school performance. These researchers find poor schools with good results and study them in some detail. In almost all cases where poor schools have done excellent work, there are three factors that stand out. Firstly, they find the presence of a competent and dedicated school principal. Secondly, these schools have teachers who are dedicated, who are prepared and who spend long hours with learners. Thirdly and critically important, these schools have developed solid relationships with parents and the communities within which they are located.

Our legal framework facilitates community involvement in the running of our schools. However, we have not gone far enough in extending oversight responsibilities with communities. Is it because we’re scared of giving power to the people? Yes, there are risks. There are risks that communities will use racial and ethnic criteria in staffing or

rewarding performance. Yes there are risks that parents often do not have the information or expertise to make some decisions about what is likely to yield better school results. However, the evidence from this HSRC research shows that in almost all cases, because it is about their own children's education, they take wise, sober decisions, free of such prejudice. While communities are not homogenous, they constitute vibrant, living entities with a high level of organisation. It is up to the institutional and legal framework to provide the space and guidance for communities to become positive influences over the performance of schools. In many cases, we have been too coy about providing the institutional space for peoples' power to prevail.

The Finance Minister from the State of Kerala in India, Dr Thomas Isaac, visited the National Treasury recently. As you might know, the State of Kerala is run by the Communist Party and has particularly good educational and health outcomes. When he was asked about what drove these sterling performances, he replied that in Kerala, when the teacher or nurse does not pitch up at work for a few days, the community will march to the village council and the village council has to report on why the teacher or nurse is not in attendance. He is immensely proud of the quality of public services in Kerala, delivered for a small fraction of what we spend – teachers, for example earn around \$ 200 per month, roughly one-fifth of what teachers in South Africa have as a starting salary. In neighbouring Tamil Nadu, if the teacher or nurse does not pitch up, no one bothers. I do not have to tell you about the education or health outcomes in the neighbouring state. When the minister was asked what single factor contributed towards good public services, he said, 'we have a robust democracy where people shout loudly and they are heard'.

Another example of where the contribution of people has made a difference is in policing. Where community police forums are encouraged and supported by the local police station, they have been invaluable allies in the fight against crime. In public statements, government often makes the call that crime cannot be beaten without solid partnerships with communities. There is clear evidence that the development of trust between the police and communities is a critical element of an effective strategy to reduce crime. In Naledi in Soweto and in Parkmore in Johannesburg, community police

forums have made a positive impact on the work of the police and have contributed both to better relationships with communities and in the reduction in crime levels. Yet there are many communities where people know exactly who the criminals are but they distrust the police to deal with the problem.

However, in policing too we have not fully embraced more democratic forms of governance. There are still too many police stations that give lip service to the notion of community police forums, too many station commanders who would prefer to do without the prying eyes of local residents.

We cannot divorce the notion of better public services from the notion of empowering communities. Empowerment is about holding government accountable, it is about making government more responsive and about taking responsibilities for the performance of public services.

When we reminisce about the 1970s and the 1980s, we often remember the mass protests, the community mobilisation, the active involvement of communities in solving their own problems. How did these things occur? Who were the catalysts? Communities did not suddenly wake up and start protesting. No, they were organised by groups of young activists, mostly students. Thousands of people visited literally millions of homes and spent time talking to families about their issues, their problems and about solutions. The Black Consciousness Movement of the 1970s raised the consciousness of society after the lull of the 60s, following the bannings and imprisonment of many leaders. The United Democratic Front of the 1980s built on top of that a culture of broad participation with the community including door-to-door work. Politics and revolution were talked about in the homes of the oppressed, in our churches, our schools and universities, on our sports fields, on trains, buses and taxis - not just in town halls.

Where have all the activists gone? What do the young people who are politically astute and socially aware do these days? Who is doing the mobilising? Who are the catalysts for social transformation?

Returning to the issue of economic empowerment, we must ask ourselves the honest but difficult question of whether the BEE model that we've adopted is meeting both the objectives set out or the aspirations of our people. Biko, in a paper entitled, *We Blacks*, writes, 'material want is bad enough but coupled with spiritual poverty, it kills'. As early as the mid-1970s, Biko foresaw the effect of this spiritual poverty. He did not mean this in a religious sense. Instead, he was referring to a lack of values, the absence of consciousness and poor understanding. The combined effect is what we today call *crass consumerism*.

This is an appropriate point to move to the final part of my talk, the construction of a social compact for development. A social compact is not a new concept, yet we've failed to grasp its meaning. At the heart of a social compact is the sense that citizenship is stewardship. A social compact requires society to set out the roles, rights and responsibilities of each element of society – government, business, labour and even the media have a role to play in this regard. I stress, a social compact is about rights AND responsibilities. However, in defining these roles and responsibilities, the primary question must be about the values that a society eschews. These values must have at their core, the principles of people-centred development, of freedom, of conscientisation, of mobilisation and of high energy democracy.

Government has a clear role to play in redistributing opportunities to the most vulnerable. Government has the right to expect from its citizens, both corporate and private that they pay their taxes, that they abide by the laws of the country in letter and spirit, and that all contribute towards development, in the spirit of our Constitution. Similarly, government has a responsibility to ensure that the quality of public services improves, that we take clear measures to protect citizens, that we spend the public's money wisely, that we clamp down on corruption and patronage, that we employ the best people for the job and that we involve local communities in the improvement of their lives.

Government has the right to intervene to try to correct market failures as efficiently as possible. We have the responsibility to listen to citizens, to create the legal environment for citizens to contribute towards better schooling, better policing and better health care.

Business has the right to invest where they see an opportunity and they have the right to make profits. They have the right to be treated fairly, to be given opportunities free of the obligations of patronage. They have the right for their property rights to be protected and to be treated fairly in matters of taxation. They also have responsibilities; to train their staff, to expand the pool of skilled people and to ensure adequate opportunities for black people and women.

We need elites that plough back, not elites that plunder. We need a business community that balances their freedom to make profits with an understanding of the distorted history of accumulation in our country. We need a private sector that is prepared to be a partner in development; yes looking for opportunities to make money, but recognising the bigger picture that a stable society is better for growth than a society wracked by social strife.

We also need a private sector that recognises that the present concentration of the economy is not necessarily good for growth and long-term development. This is a difficult situation for business to manage because it is not intuitive to business that long term growth and prosperity requires a different organisation of ownership. We expect business to take tougher measures to curb anti-competitive practices, to ensure proper governance and oversight of listed companies and to think consciously about tomorrow, not just today.

Roberto Unger uses a wonderful phrase. He says, 'Capitalism must be imposed on the capitalists'.

Organised labour plays a critical role in the economy and in the delivery of public services. We have a labour regime where the rights of workers are protected, where collective bargaining is entrenched, where through NEDLAC, labour plays a role in the development and formulation of policy. We also need a labour movement that

recognises that they have responsibilities too. Expanding employment is a critical requirement in our country and our labour movement has to recognise that there is sometimes a trade-off between the level of wages and the number of people employed. We need a labour movement that openly condemns its members if they are not teaching the requisite hours, or if they arrive late at school. The labour movement must become a partner in the construction of a state that delivers better services to people.

Communities and community organisations must become the lifeblood of a high energy democracy as they too have rights and responsibilities. To repeat the lesson from Biko's writings, they cannot be passive recipients of development.

Communities were the mainstay of the resistance against apartheid; it was also, incidentally, the object of the Black Community Programmes, undertaken by the Black People's Convention. When we look back on the uprising of the any point in history – whether it be the Defiance Campaign of the 1950's; the resistance to Pass Laws or the roll-out of the M-Plan in the 1960's; the BPC programmes of the late 1960's or early 1970's; the support for the student uprising in 1976 and beyond; or whether we are exploring the state of organisation that gave birth to the UDF in 1983 or spawned by UDF activities the focus has always been on organised communities.

Forget any idea that one fine day in 1985, or whenever, communities across the length and breadth of South Africa suddenly rose up; encouraged to do so by some prophet, perhaps even a contemporary Nongqawuse, and in the consequence President de Klerk delivered democracy.

Organised communities were truly organised – they were mobilised by the hard work of activists trudging through streets in all weather to talk to people about their lives. This action was first level conscientisation. Ordinary people thus persuaded would then attend meetings, in order to commune. Frequently people thereafter took responsibility for convening whether it was a street committee, parents committee, an anti-crime forum, or even a Ministers Fraternal. The spark, the initial action was lit by the activists – mainly students who would undertake such provocative activities after campus.

What we have illustrated is that democracy is now begging for organised communities to fulfil their responsibilities. Democracy is crying out for School Governing Bodies in those areas where the poor have no option but to send their children to the local schools; democracy is pleading with us to improve on the lives of the poor by removing the scourge of crime by holding police locally accountable; democracy is imploring us to give our youth a chance by the organisation of amateur sports codes in townships across the country; she is demanding that we collaborate to ensure that there is value for money in all public services. Democracy understands her origins and her history; she knows that she is the product of high-level sacrifice.

A social compact requires each of us to put our narrow interests aside in the interests of long-term growth and development. It requires hard work, the construction of careful compromises and trade-offs aimed at ending the narrow insider-outsider divide. The cost of failure is high. The cost of failure is that we will continue to lose skills, we will continue to battle with high unemployment and public services will remain poor for the majority of our people. We will continue to see sporadic outbursts of violence. Most importantly, any vision of a better life for all would become a distant dream.

Do we have the leaders in government, in business and in the labour movement to take some of these bold decisions, to confront the difficult trade-offs in the interest of our country? Or are we going to continue to put short term gain at the expense of longer term development? I am an optimist and I do believe that South Africa has the leaders to confront these difficult issues, to draw on the inspiration of Biko, to give people-centred democracy a chance to work.

In conclusion let me repeat the lesson that Biko taught us. Democracy is something to fight for, constantly. Development is not something handed out at the welfare office. It is a conscious process of building capabilities, giving communities power to change their lives, empowering young women and men to make a contribution to our beautiful country.

At the root of Biko's teachings and the thread that runs through the references from Marx and Unger is the concept of consciousness, the deep understanding of the self-

worth of people and the power of communities. The poor must be given the power to change their lives. Biko's vision of an energised democracy is only possible if we think about empowerment differently. An energised democracy is only possible if we have it within ourselves to construct a social compact that puts our long term interests above short term gain. An energised democracy is one where each element, business, labour, government and communities balance their rights with their responsibilities.

This moment could define our collective future. Let us utilise it for a national catharsis. Let us work together as advised by Unger who writes, "Social solidarity must rest (instead) on the sole secure basis it can have: direct responsibility of people for one another. Such responsibility can be realized through the principle that every able-bodied adult holds a position within a caring economy – the part of the economy in which people care for one another – as well as within the production system."

To dare any less would be to abandon the vision of leaders in the mould of Bantu Steve Biko.

Thank you.